

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony of U.S. Representative Wally Herger

Wally Herger
Member of Congress

House Resources Subcommittee on
Forests and Forest Health

Northern Spotted Owl Oversight Hearing
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1324 Longworth HOB

Madame Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding oversight of the northern spotted owl.

When this subspecies originally was listed by the Fish & Wildlife Service on June 26, 1990, the Service indicated two reasons for declaring the northern spotted owl as a threatened species: 1). widespread destruction and modification of its habitat, and 2). existing regulatory mechanisms were inadequate to control further habitat loss. However, since 1990, the definition of suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl has expanded until it now includes approximately 80 percent of the forested lands in California alone. Therefore, of the service's two reasons for listing the owl, 1). widespread destruction and modification of owl habitat has not occurred and in fact, an increase in habitat has been found, and 2). California regulatory mechanisms have been found to provide adequate habitat protection.

In addition, since its listing, owl numbers have been found to be much higher than previously estimated. In 1986, the National Audubon Society convened a "blue ribbon panel" of experts to determine how many owls were needed to keep the species viable. They determined viability would require between 1,100 and 1,200 pairs, or 2,200 to 2,400 total owls. In 1991, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reported that further studies established at least 3,500 known pairs of owls -- or 7,000 total owls -- throughout California and the pacific northwest. This is three times the number experts originally reported were needed for a viable population. In addition, in 1995 the U.S. Forest Service reported an additional 2,600 to 4,000 California spotted owls in northern California. According to Forest Service biologists, California spotted owls are genetically identical to northern spotted owls and are fully capable of interbreeding with the northern owl. The only difference is that California owls live in the Sierra Mountain range, while the northern owl lives in the Cascade Mountain range. This means that just two years ago there were between 9,600 and 11,000 total spotted owls in California and the pacific northwest -- between four and five times the number that scientists have stated are needed to keep the species viable. Each year the total number increases as new nesting sites are confirmed. Yet the species is still listed as threatened and is still managed as though it were in decline.

Since the listing of the northern spotted owl, 36 mills in my district alone have been forced to close their doors. A 37th mill is currently shut down until more local timber supplies can be found. This dramatic loss of jobs has forced many community members onto the welfare rolls. A professor at the University of California at Berkley estimated, in 1993 alone, the unemployment compensation resulting from the implementation of the President's plan for the spotted owl increased by over \$745 million dollars. In recent years, Trinity County in my district has had an unemployment rate that has at times hovered around 20%. Siskiyou County reported that in some years, 23 of 29 schools in the county have 50% or more of their children receiving meals for needy children. This is a tragedy. These people don't want welfare. They want to work.

Madame Chairman, a strong economy and a healthy environment need not be mutually exclusive. The endangered species act was never intended to foster intolerance in our society, yet that is exactly what happens every time we pit saving species against jobs and education. By relying on sound science we can maintain spotted owl populations and ensure jobs for our communities and support for our schools.

If there was once a need to protect the spotted owl that need has clearly been met. It is time to review the manner in which we deal with the spotted owl.

Again thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of my constituents.

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